

ALTERNATIVE REALITIES

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Janet Hoskins, *The Play of Time. Kodi Perspectives on Calendars, History, and Exchange*. Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: The University of California Press, 1993. xx, 414 pp. Tables, maps, photographs, index.

Mary Margaret Steedly, *Hanging without a Rope. Narrative Experience in Colonial and Post-colonial Karoland*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993. xvi, 306 pp. Photographs, index.

C. W. Watson and Roy Ellen, ed. *Understanding Witchcraft and Sorcery in Southeast Asia*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1993. viii, 222 pp. Map, index.

During Europe's Enlightenment, scholars embarked on the study of distant cultures as a way of exploring the manifold wonders of the world. By this century, their purpose had narrowed: alien cultures were studied in order to control subject populations, and, if appropriate, to guide them toward the mecca of modernity. Eventually, however, there began to take hold the feeling that valid ways of life were being swept away by modernity's tide, and that if these could not be preserved they must at least be recorded. This sense of cultural loss has now extended to ourselves, for so universal and overwhelming do present transformations seem that our own past threatens to become incomprehensible.

In this context, what matters most is not the discovery of new facts or of laws of human behavior but the evocation of other mentalities, through which we can locate ourselves in terms of our own past and our possibilities. This mood, at once open and introspective, has been reinforced by the failure of ideologies: we now seek wisdom less in grand designs than in nuances, contradictions, and dilemmas. The favored tools for revealing these have been history, anthropology, and literature, and in wielding them scholars have increasingly transgressed disciplinary boundaries and the hitherto inviolable border between academic fact and poetic imagination. Their purpose has been to place our current assumptions in a perspective that is not teleological but, in its own way, returns to the idea of exploring mankind's variety.

The first two of the works under review are excellent examples of this approach. They are ethnographic studies which aim at opening out two central assumptions of history, the

idea of time and the relating of events. Hoskins seeks to expand our consciousness by looking at a society with a far more elaborate apprehension of time than ours. What we lump under the single word "time" is divided into several concepts by the people of Kodi on the island of Sumba. Moreover, the Kodinese recognize times whose dimensions are individually shaped by the entities to which they refer. Kodi's acquisition of a time of its own was, as its people see it, an essential marker of their civilizational emergence. In this society the highest office is that of the master of the year, on whose pronouncements people rely for scheduling the rituals marking the seasons.

Kodi society is highly competitive, and time is an essential ingredient in its intricate exchanges of goods and prestige; Hoskins' discussion is accordingly rich in information on the society's economics and politics. True, aspects which are not central to her chosen angle of approach may not be developed: the reader may be intrigued by casual references to megaliths and stone-draggings, but he will have to satisfy his curiosity on such points through the author's writings elsewhere. Needless to say, history plays a major role in a discussion centered on time, but the chronicling of Kodi's past is not her principal concern. Rather, Hoskins aims at conveying ideas of the past, and of showing how they relate to that part of Kodi society which has been least touched ideologically by modernization. Nonetheless, that society was never static and is now changing rapidly, and this, as she shows, has affected its ideas of time. Christian missionaries introduced the week, and thus the notion of a ritual cyclical time; nationalists introduced the idea of the epoch and the concept that the past is less an accumulation of heritage than a series of linear, non-repeating events. Thus history has been born in Kodi, its name—*sejarah*—reflecting its outside origins. At the same time, a national bureaucracy imposes its own calendar and its own norms in the name of order and the tourist trade. Not surprisingly, Kodinese feel the times are out of joint—or, as they might put it, that they have lost their time.

Since Kodinese narrate the past in order to assert claims—most typically for lineage precedence—they have no expectation of an objective recounting or of a correspondence between accounts. What gives weight to a version of the past is not its argument but the existence of a material object which can be seen as "hard" evidence of the tale told. The question of what narrative can and cannot tell us about a society and its past is taken up in Steedly's study of spirit mediums among the Karo of north Sumatra. History is written by victors, she reminds us, and those counter-elites who challenge them present equally one-sided and often closely related versions of the past; her purpose is to record the voices that are excluded in this dialogue. In other words, like Hoskins, Steedly ignores the bureaucratized bourgeoisie and the representatives of local Christianity for a group that tries to keep the old ways. The vision of such people may not be truer as far as fact is concerned—and it is certainly not more "important," for they have been pushed to the economic and social margins—but it is better able to reflect the condition of being caught between an irrelevant past and an alien present, of being part of a society which, in a Karo phrase, has been left hanging without a rope.

Steedly sketches the outlines of precolonial Karo society, a world in which the spirits (and their interpreters) played a major role in determining rank, reinforcing kinship bonds, and alleviating misfortune. She then shows how the colonial experience destroyed the basis for this civilization, partly by imposing new concepts of government and power but even more by introducing very different roles for exchange and the marketplace. Indonesia's postindependence regimes have continued this work. Indeed, they have "doubly erased" local experience, firstly by treating anything that does not fit into the "ordered route of national progress" as an aberration and therefore not part of real history, and second by

transforming anything that can be made to fit into a local reflection of a nationally determined past (p. 75).

As a result, the old Karo stories which provided a *turi-turin*—an orderly sequence of things—and which told of such things as the origins of medicine, the sources of magical power, and the relationship between spirits and society, have been replaced by *sejarah*; the guru who understood these stories were left without anything to say in the new dispensation. Yet they persist, and people consult them, in the cities as well as the countryside. Those who do so are usually the poor and uncertain; for them, the arbitrariness and disjuncture of contacts with the spirits offers a greater chance of succor than the alien rationality of official discourse. A whole world exists on the margins of the official one, and it is not the smaller part.

Steadly explores this world through the stories that people tell about their own past, the spirits of Mt. Sibayak, the creation of a “modern” association representing the old beliefs, the summoning of the spirit of a man who died in the killings following the 1965 coup. She does so by weaving a tapestry of images rather than presenting an academically ordered account, seeking thereby to avoid the “binarism of ‘continuity’ and ‘change’” by which we tend to understand social history (p. 118). To my mind she is wholly successful in this, aided in no small part by a luminous prose; she gives us a vivid and melancholy glimpse of efforts to patch together a disintegrating world of thought.

The third work under consideration is broader geographically and less ambitious intellectually, but readers will find useful material with which to place aspects of Hoskins’ and Steadly’s accounts in a comparative ethnological context. It consists of eleven essays, of which three are on Thailand (Louis Golomb on urban areas, Paul Durrenberger on the Lisu, and Nicola Tannenbaum on the Shan). The rest deal with Indonesia and Malaysia: Roy Ellen on the Nuaulu of Seram, Gregory Forth on the Nage of Flores, Ronny Nitibaskara on Java, Herman Slaats and Karen Portier on sorcery and the law in modern Indonesia, Michael Peletz on Negri Sembilan, John Bowen on the Gayo, and C.W. Watson on the portrayal of sorcery in Indonesian literature.

The collection is specifically concerned with the character and employment of malign magic, thus not the broader relationship between the spirit world and mankind. Several of the authors note that we cannot really understand the role of sorcery without its broader ideological context, but as most of the essays are quite short they cannot do much more than sketch this. They do, however, outline relevant cultural features which share broad aspects across the region and at the same time are markedly varied.

As Ellen notes in his introduction, Africa has been the home of studies of sorcery and witchcraft; this collection is the outcome of an attempt to discover whether the same phenomenon was significant in Southeast Asia, and if so why it had hitherto been little described. As the essays show, Southeast Asian ideas of malign magic certainly exist. It appears, however, that they have been subject to a double denial. First, they have been ignored by colonial authorities, who appear to have assumed that witchcraft was appropriate for Africans but not for people that supposedly adhered to major religions. Second, Southeast Asians themselves have tended to downplay the importance of sorcery. They view the world as a naturally dangerous place; disaster being immanent, its occurrence is not necessarily the work of an ill-wisher. Moreover, calmness and smooth relations are highly valued for reducing a person’s vulnerability and presenting an image of power and control; open accusations of sorcery are thus rarely made. No one admits to engaging in black magic; the experts who are consulted about such matters and their clients consistently claim they are warding off malign efforts not initiating them. Among the Gayo the avoid-

ance of personal confrontation has been developed to such an extent that sorcerous spells can be turned against their originator without the need of identifying him at all.

If sorcery is talked about generally by Southeast Asians, outsiders or minority groups are suggested as its source. This pushes blame to the social margins; moreover, people of other (particularly "wilder") ethnicities are imagined to have particular access to the spirit world. In individual cases, however, sorcery accusations follow the lines of social strain in the group where they occur, and often involve closely connected people. Their occurrence seems particularly related to the stress of change, and as a result "modernization" has not ended and may even have increased them.

Colonial authorities tended to define sorcery out of *adat*, as repugnant to civilized sensibilities. Slaats and Portier note, however, that present-day Indonesian authorities take accusations of sorcery more seriously, as evidence of social disruption. Their sympathies are with the accusers, not the presumed witch, and the writers see in this tendency to take magic more seriously an increased alignment by officials with popular notions concerning the supernatural (pp. 142–43). Or perhaps, in mirroring the hangups of a security-conscious elite, it tells us something more generally about the origins of notions of subversion; and thus, reflecting upon a distant world, we may learn something of our own.